

Thoughts On A String: The Value of a Life

By Charles Chatmon

In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger Thomas is on trial for killing the wealthy white socialite Mary Dalton. The police in the novel go on a city-wide manhunt after Bigger, arresting Black men who looked like him. The media demonizes Bigger and the judicial system does the convicted Black man no favors due to the atrocity of what he had done. If you've read the novel, no doubt you've seen what the prosecutor named Buckley does to present Mary in a good light for the jury. What he fails to note was that Mary hung around members of the Communist Party, who opposed America's capitalist structure.

I bring this up not because Kobe Bryant escaped a criminal trial in Eagle County, Colorado after being accused of raping a hotel employee, who happens to be a young white female and the jury for all intents and purposes shared her ethnic background; not because this is a decade since the O.J. Simpson arrest and trial leading up to his controversial acquittal of the murder of his Caucasian wife and her associate; nor am I bringing this subject up to rehash any trials of the past ten years or to offer analysis of them. This subject presented is to bring to our attention about life and how we value it as a society whenever these incidents come up.

Bigger murders Mary, the socialite in *Native Son* as written before. He also murders a Negro woman named Bessie, but you won't hear Buckley present her in the same manner as Mary. Rather than treat her as a human being, the prosecutor adds Bigger's woman as an example of his destructive pattern. She is merely an afterthought, insignificant in Buckley's and perhaps the jury's eyes. On the basis of class and race, we do value one life over the other. In principle, we should value every life regardless, but as far as selling magazines or television ratings, it doesn't mean as much.

For example, the O.J. Simpson case was a media frenzy from start to finish. We remember how it all happened, the who, what and whys. We do know his ex-wife Nicole was white and came from an upper class family as did her associate Ronald Goldman. Opinions of race from both sides emerged out of that trial and perhaps revealed a deeper truth of what people really think. The conservative side declared Black jurors can't think independently. They are biased towards their own race and would not dare convict another Black man or woman even if they are guilty. My personal experiences serving on a jury and witnessing them from afar would convince me that is far from the truth. Yet the media perception of that notion by lifting quotes from Johnny Cochran, part of O.J.'s 'Dream Team', fueled the fire for that argument.

On the other hand, the progressive mindset would say O.J. beat the system. When Cochran employed his strategy of the mistakes L.A.P.D. made during the case and using the fresh negative images of the police for their role

or lack of it in the midst of the L.A. Riots three years prior, it made his case that much easier. However, Cochran was paid by O.J. There are many young men sitting in that jail who probably had lawyers try the same strategy and failed. It's just not reported as much that Black juries found these individuals guilty of their crimes. But of course, that isn't newsworthy right?

When Ray Carruth, a wide receiver for the Carolina Panthers years past, murdered his wife and child, where were the cameras? Where was the outrage? The legal experts? Wasn't the death of his pregnant wife just as hideous as the death of Nicole Simpson? Apparently not, for we at home were bombarded with O.J. Simpson trial news almost every day. On certain days, for half an hour tops. Carruth's case received maybe 30 second sound bites nationally. Carruth didn't have the famed career of Simpson, but it didn't matter. Both were tragedies of significance, but the murder of a wealthy socialite weighs more than the senseless death of a woman with child. Unless it's the Laci Peterson case, but I

digress.

What's even more tragic was the reaction or lack of it of the Latasha Harlins case. Thirteen days after Rodney King was beaten, the fifteen year old Harlins was shot in the back by an Asian storeowner, on videotape! The community was incensed, but those outside the area were not by their silence. Even more shocking, after the storeowner was found guilty with voluntary manslaughter, the judge in the case, Joyce Karlin astonishingly gave her probation. Not only was the verdict an insult to those in the community, but it sent a message that even a young Black girl's life in Southside was insignificant. Add that to the fact Tynisha Miller received 12 fatal shots from Riverside, California police officers, who were exonerated by the local District Attorney, and Amadou Bailo Diallo was shot 41 times by NYPD officers, and the senseless murder of James Byrd, Jr. all reinforce the truth that color and class status does influence how the value of human life is measured. It also indicts our society on our willing blindness overall in matters such as these.

Whenever we look at these unfortunate events, we hardly see the human element outside the upper class point of view, especially if the victims are those of color. Maybe if we the public had viewed Carruth's girlfriend in the same light we saw Nicole Simpson, there would be more outrage as we have seen as the case came to pass. Instead, it was for a few scant seconds we knew anything about her and that was it. However, due to the plethora of media coverage given to either O.J. or Kobe-like trial cases, the images, opinions about them will remain in our heads for years to come. Maybe that's an indictment of how far or short we've come in race relations when it comes to how we judge human life. You be the judge of that.

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